

## **Authentic Leadership and Employee Performance: The Sequential Mediating Role of Trust and Leader–Member Exchange in Healthcare**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, authentic leadership has emerged as a key area of interest in leadership research. This study explores the employee-centered perspective of authentic leadership and its influence on individual performance, examining the sequential mediating roles of trust and leader–member exchange (LMX). Survey data were gathered from 320 employees in Pakistan’s healthcare sector. The findings demonstrate that authentic leadership positively impacts individual performance both directly and indirectly through trust and LMX. The results further reveal that leaders exhibiting authenticity cultivate a trustworthy atmosphere, which enhances LMX quality and, consequently, employee performance. By integrating four critical constructs into a single model, this research provides new evidence on the mechanisms through which authentic leadership affects performance. Implications for theory, practice, and future research directions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Authentic leadership, Trust, Leader–member exchange, Employee performance, Healthcare, Leadership

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### **Introduction**

Authentic leadership (AL) has increasingly garnered attention over the past decade for its potential to enhance individual performance, as authentic leaders exhibit positive psychological qualities [1]. Research suggests that AL fosters employee performance and positively influences work-related outcomes [2-5]. In organizational behavior studies, AL has emerged as a significant topic due to its ability to cultivate self-awareness, ethical conduct, and balanced behaviors, reducing common leadership challenges such as egoism and abusive practices [6-8].

Authentic leaders promote trust and high-quality leader–member exchange (LMX) relationships, which in turn positively influence individual performance [9-13]. AL also contributes to increased job engagement, affective commitment, and job satisfaction among employees [14-16], ultimately benefiting organizations by supporting sustainable growth and competitive advantage. Supervisory behavior has been recognized as a key determinant of employee performance, particularly in human-service sectors such as healthcare, where leaders shape followers’ behaviors, attitudes, and service delivery [17-19].

Despite growing interest, empirical research linking AL to individual performance through mediating mechanisms such as trust and LMX remains limited [3]. Trust is central to fostering a positive and cooperative workplace environment and is defined as the belief in others’ reliability and positive intentions [12, 13, 20, 21]. Authentic leaders create supportive environments that enhance employees’ trust [22, 23]. LMX, which reflects the quality of leader–subordinate relationships, is

similarly influenced by AL, as authentic leaders encourage flexible, supportive, and relationship-focused behaviors [10, 24, 25]. High-quality LMX has been shown to affect both individual and organizational performance [26-28].

This study seeks to address gaps in the literature by empirically examining AL's impact on individual performance through the sequential mediating roles of trust and LMX. The findings contribute to social exchange theory by exploring previously untested relationships, highlight the mediating influence of trust and LMX in leadership-performance linkages, and provide insights into how authentic leadership fosters positive employee outcomes through enhanced trust and leader-member interactions.

## Structure of the Study

This research is structured to provide a clear and logical flow. It starts with an abstract and key terms, followed by an introduction that outlines the main variables under investigation. A detailed review of the recent literature is then presented to contextualize the study. Next, the methodology section explains the research design, sampling, and data collection process from 320 healthcare employees in Pakistan. The analysis and results are discussed in subsequent sections, leading to conclusions, identification of study strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future research in related areas.

### *Authentic leadership and individual performance*

Authentic leadership (AL) has gained considerable attention in organizational research due to its potential to enhance employee performance [1, 29]. AL emphasizes leaders' positive psychological capacities and ethical conduct, which encourage self-awareness, moral integrity, balanced decision-making, and transparent relationships with subordinates. This leadership style fosters employees' personal growth and workplace effectiveness [30].

The concept of AL can be broken down into four core dimensions: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective [29]. Self-awareness enables leaders and followers to understand their goals, values, and motivations. Balanced processing allows leaders to consider multiple perspectives without bias or defensiveness. Relational transparency encourages open communication and mutual respect, while internalized moral perspective ensures ethical behavior and fairness in all interactions [31].

Leaders who embody these qualities also demonstrate optimism, confidence, ethical conduct, and a focus on developing employees' potential [1, 32, 33]. Over time, authentic leaders cultivate genuine relationships with followers, enhancing trust and engagement [12, 13]. Empirical studies have linked AL to numerous positive work outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, task performance, creativity, commitment, and overall psychological empowerment [12, 13, 34-36].

Social exchange theory explains that when employees perceive their leaders as authentic and supportive, they are more likely to reciprocate through higher effort and engagement, which ultimately improves performance outcomes [11, 37]. AL also promotes autonomy and self-efficacy among subordinates, which further enhances their ability to perform effectively in the workplace [12, 13, 29].

**Hypothesis H1:** Authentic leadership is positively associated with individual performance.

### *Mediating role of trust*

Trust is conceptualized as employees' belief, confidence, and expectations that their leaders and organization will act fairly and with integrity [38]. Morgan and Hunt [39] define trust as "the confidence one party has in the reliability and honesty of another," while it is also described as "the willingness to be vulnerable to another party's actions" (p. 712). When employees perceive a safe and supportive environment, their trust increases, making them more open and engaged [40]. Trust is both a social and psychological construct, reflecting the quality of interactions between actors in organizational settings [41-43]. Various studies have conceptualized trust through multiple lenses, such as cognitive- and affect-based trust [44], as well as situational and dispositional perspectives [45]. It can also be classified by strength—weak, moderate, or strong [46]—and includes attributes like transparency, reliability, integrity, competence, benevolence, and consistency [47, 48].

Drawing from social exchange theory [37], trust can be understood as the outcome of repeated interactions between leaders and subordinates, where positive behaviors are reciprocated [49]. Employees tend to respond to favorable treatment from leaders with increased effort and loyalty, reinforcing trust within the workplace [50-52]. In this context, authentic leaders foster trust through consistent actions, ethical behavior, and engagement in decision-making, which cultivates a supportive and positive work environment [1, 11-13]. High levels of trust lead employees to invest greater effort in their tasks and improve performance outcomes [12-14]. Prior research highlights trust as a critical mechanism linking authentic leadership to desirable employee outcomes, including engagement, commitment, and overall job performance [22, 23, 53]. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis H2:** Trust significantly mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance.

### *Mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX)*

Leader-member exchange (LMX) refers to the quality of the relationship and ongoing social exchanges between a leader and their subordinates, often evolving through informal interactions in the workplace [28, 54]. LMX reflects the overall strength of the leader-follower relationship, which develops through repeated exchanges of support, resources, and effort [24, 55]. According to social exchange theory, these interactions are reciprocal: positive actions or resources from one party elicit corresponding responses from the other, fostering high-quality relationships [37, 50].

LMX relationships typically progress through three stages [56]. First, in the role-taking phase, leaders assess subordinates' skills, motivation, and potential. Next, during role-making, leaders define responsibilities and expectations. Finally, a reciprocal exchange emerges, establishing mutual obligations and trust between leader and follower. High-quality LMX motivates subordinates to reciprocate with greater effort, commitment, and improved performance outcomes [28, 57]. Consequently, LMX is positioned as an essential mediator linking authentic leadership with individual performance, facilitating stronger engagement, cooperation, and overall work effectiveness.

### *Mediating role of LMX*

Authentic leaders aim to foster a positive organizational environment that supports employees' performance by offering assistance during stressful situations and ensuring transparent and fair interactions. They also cultivate long-term communication with subordinates, which builds loyalty and trust [58]. This trust and loyalty are strengthened when authentic leaders develop high-quality leader-member exchanges (LMX) with their employees [59]. In this dynamic, leaders rely on employees for support when necessary, while employees depend on leaders for guidance, career development, and encouragement [24]. LMX facilitates a balance between autonomy and structured guidance, enabling employees to enhance their self-sufficiency and capability [60].

Based on previous research, authentic leadership promotes high-quality LMX, which in turn positively influences individual performance. Evidence from the literature indicates that LMX often serves as an indirect mechanism linking authentic leadership with work outcomes such as creativity, innovative behavior, and employee voice [10, 58, 61]. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that authentic leadership improves individual performance through its impact on LMX.

**Hypothesis H3:** LMX significantly mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance.

### *Sequential mediating role of trust and LMX*

Research suggests that individual performance can be enhanced through authentic leadership via the dual pathways of trust and LMX. Authentic leaders' positive attributes foster employees' trust, which encourages them to exert greater effort and engagement in their work [3, 12, 13]. Employees experiencing high levels of trust tend to display stronger organizational commitment, higher job satisfaction, and increased engagement, contributing positively to organizational outcomes [9, 14, 38].

Trust also lays the foundation for the development of high-quality LMX [58]. When employees perceive strong trust in their leader, they are more likely to engage in effective exchanges that enhance psychological, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes [3, 10, 28]. Studies highlight that authentic leadership positively affects both trust and LMX, while high-quality LMX is critical for improving individual performance [11-13, 26, 62]. According to social exchange theory, trust-based LMX motivates employees to reciprocate with desirable behaviors and positive attitudes [37, 41]. Authentic leaders, through supportive and autonomous work practices, foster trust and high-quality LMX, which in turn drives employees to deliver superior performance [3, 10, 63].

Following this logic, authentic leadership can indirectly enhance individual performance through a sequential mediation effect of trust and LMX. Trust encourages the development of strong LMX, and this high-quality leader-follower relationship subsequently motivates employees to achieve common goals effectively.

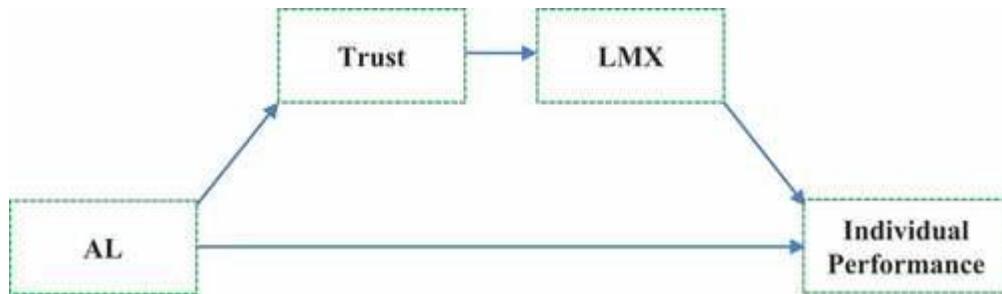
**Hypothesis H4:** Trust and LMX sequentially mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance.

### *Research gaps and study contributions*

Despite extensive research on authentic leadership (AL) and employee performance, there remains a lack of studies exploring how trust and leader-member exchange (LMX) jointly mediate this relationship in a sequential manner. This study addresses this gap by examining the mechanisms through which AL influences individual performance in hospital settings. The results highlight that AL directly enhances employees' performance, while also fostering an environment of trust that further supports work outcomes. Additionally, AL strengthens performance indirectly by promoting high-quality LMX relationships between leaders and subordinates. Importantly, the study demonstrates that the combined sequential effect of trust and LMX provides a more comprehensive understanding of the pathways through which AL can positively shape employee performance. These findings extend current knowledge on leadership dynamics in healthcare organizations and provide actionable insights for enhancing staff productivity.

### Conceptual model

**Figure 1** depicts the proposed model, illustrating how authentic leadership impacts individual performance through the sequential mediation of trust and LMX, highlighting the interconnected influence of these constructs in enhancing employees' work outcomes [3, 10, 58].



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework

### Methodology

#### Sample and data collection

A quantitative research design was adopted for this study to examine the proposed relationships among the constructs. Data were collected from healthcare professionals employed in various hospitals located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Only individuals with a minimum of two years of professional experience were considered eligible to participate. A structured questionnaire was distributed to these professionals to gather the required information. A cross-sectional sampling approach was employed, as it allows data collection from a wide range of respondents at a single point in time and facilitates comparison across different groups. Out of 377 distributed questionnaires, 320 were completed and deemed usable, resulting in an effective response rate of 85%. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Demographic Statistics

Demographics	Description	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	178	56
	Female	142	44
<b>Age</b>	20–25	33	10
	26–30	49	15
	31–35	56	18
	36–40	69	22
	41–45	39	12
	46–50	43	13
<b>Experience</b>	51 & above	31	10
	1–5	73	23
	6–10	91	28
	11–15	64	20
	16–20	53	17
	Above 20	39	12
<b>Qualification</b>	Undergraduate	86	27
	Graduation	168	53
	Master & above	66	21

#### Data analysis

For analyzing the collected data, a variety of statistical procedures were applied using Smart PLS. In social science research, structural equation modeling (SEM) is recognized as an effective multivariate technique for testing causal relationships (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2007). This study specifically employed path analysis to examine causal pathways. Using Smart PLS, model path coefficients and overall model fit were evaluated with the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method. Respondents indicated their agreement with each questionnaire item using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree").

#### Authentic leadership (Independent Variable)

To measure authentic leadership (AL) attributes among hospital professionals, the study utilized the widely adopted scale by Walumbwa *et al.* [29]. This instrument assesses four core dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized

moral perspective, and balanced information processing. The scale contains 16 items, including an example such as “Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.85, indicating strong internal consistency.

### Trust (Mediating Variable)

Workplace trust among hospital employees was evaluated using a seven-item scale adapted from Koohang *et al.* [47]. An example item is: “The compassion and empathy demonstrated by a leader builds trust among people.” The reliability of this scale, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.79.

### Leader-member exchange (LMX, Mediating Variable)

LMX was measured with a seven-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien [24]. A sample statement from the scale is: “My leader understands my working difficulties and needs.” Cronbach’s alpha for this construct was 0.90, demonstrating excellent reliability.

### Individual performance (Dependent Variable)

The dependent variable, individual performance, was measured using a scale proposed by Staples *et al.* [64]. An example item is: “I am an efficient worker.” The scale exhibited a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86, confirming strong reliability.

## Results

Each model is comprised of structural and measurement components. The quality and validity of the structural model depend heavily on the reliability and accuracy of the measurement model [65].

### Measurement model

The measurement model was assessed for reliability and validity of all proposed constructs. Reliability, determined through inter-item consistency, was evaluated using both composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha. As shown in **Table 2**, all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7 for both CR and alpha [66, 67]. Convergent validity (CV) was assessed at the item level via factor loadings, with all items showing loadings above 0.7 [68]. At the construct level, average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.5, confirming adequate convergent validity [67, 68]. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with all construct pairs showing values below 0.85 [69]. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation (SD), and correlations among variables, are presented in **Table 3**, confirming significant relationships.

**Table 2.** Reliability and validity

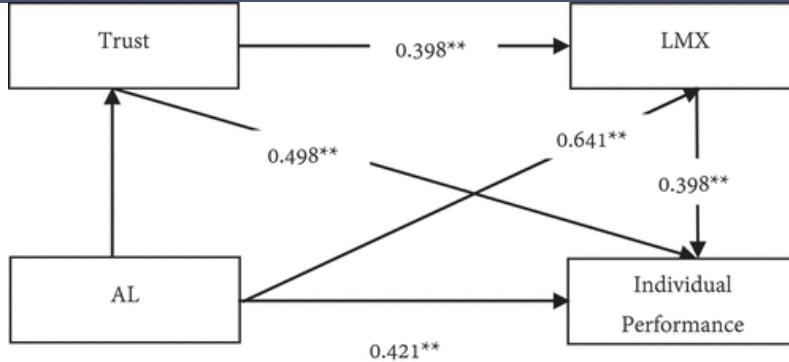
S#	Variables	Min. loading	Alpha	CR	AVE	HTMT ratio		
						1	2	3
1	AL	0.760	0.851	0.874	0.652			
2	Trust	0.709	0.795	0.818	0.541	0.603		
3	LMX	0.734	0.901	0.805	0.682	0.684	0.714	
4	IP	0.792	0.868	0.731	0.702	0.632	0.701	0.598

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics

S#	Variables	M	SD	Correlation		
				1	2	3
1	AL	3.014	0.731			
2	Trust	3.415	0.724	0.609**		
3	LMX	3.243	0.774	0.645**	0.690**	
4	IP	3.041	0.784	0.703**	0.659**	0.713**

Notes: \*\* shows significant of correlation at the two tailed (0.01 levels)

The analysis of the structural model was conducted to evaluate both the direct and indirect associations between the constructs, as summarized in **Table 4**. Results indicate that authentic leadership (AL) has a significant direct impact on individual performance ( $\beta = 0.421$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. When trust was included as a mediator, the effect of AL on performance remained significant ( $\beta = 0.498$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming Hypothesis 2. Likewise, leader-member exchange (LMX) served as a significant mediator between AL and performance ( $\beta = 0.641$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), validating Hypothesis 3. Finally, the sequential mediation pathway through both trust and LMX was also significant ( $\beta = 0.398$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 4. These relationships are illustrated in **Figures 1 and 2**.

**Figure 2.** Structural model**Table 4.** Structural model

Association	Coefficient	SE	t-test	p-value
AL Individual performance	0.421	0.025	19.110	0.000
AL Trust Individual performance	0.498	0.034	22.004	0.000
AL LMX Individual performance	0.641	0.031	16.318	0.000
AL Trust LMX individual performance	0.398	0.029	7.254	0.000

## Conclusion

In the healthcare sector, employee performance plays a critical role in ensuring efficient service delivery and achieving higher levels of patient satisfaction. This study aimed to deepen understanding of the factors influencing individual performance among hospital employees and to expand existing knowledge in this area. Specifically, the research addressed four objectives: (1) to examine the direct impact of authentic leadership (AL) on hospital employee performance, (2) to assess the mediating role of trust in the relationship between AL and performance, (3) to evaluate the mediating role of leader-member exchange (LMX) in the same context, and (4) to explore the combined sequential mediation effect of trust and LMX between AL and performance.

The findings supported all hypotheses, confirming that AL is positively associated with individual performance. Authentic leaders, through attributes such as transparency, optimism, resilience, ethics, and future orientation, foster and motivate higher performance among followers [10-13, 59]. These results align with previous research identifying AL as a significant antecedent of individual performance [3, 33, 70]. Furthermore, trust was found to mediate the AL–performance relationship, highlighting that employees perform better when they believe their leaders are fair, ethical, and supportive [22, 36]. This supports social exchange theory, indicating that subordinates reciprocate trustworthy leadership with enhanced job engagement and performance [12, 13, 37, 71].

Similarly, high-quality LMX positively influenced employee performance under authentic leadership. Effective communication, guidance, and relational support between leaders and followers were critical in driving performance outcomes in the healthcare setting [10, 72]. Finally, the sequential mediation analysis confirmed that trust and LMX together reinforce the effect of AL on individual performance, demonstrating that combined relational and psychological mechanisms amplify employee work outcomes.

## Practical Implications

The study offers several practical insights for healthcare management. First, leaders in hospitals should act as role models by demonstrating authentic behaviors that encourage and sustain high employee performance. Second, fostering a trust-based organizational culture is essential, which can be achieved through transparent communication, genuine concern for employees, and ethical leadership practices [12, 13, 22, 29, 57]. Third, organizations should recognize the importance of LMX in improving performance and invest in initiatives that promote strong leader-follower relationships. Overall, healthcare institutions should consider both trust and LMX as strategic tools to cultivate a more effective and productive workforce.

## Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the literature in multiple ways. Drawing on social exchange theory, it identifies trust and LMX as critical mediating mechanisms that explain how AL enhances individual performance. Prior studies often examined either a single mediator or incomplete theoretical frameworks [3, 61, 73, 74]. By incorporating both trust and LMX as single and sequential mediators, this study provides a comprehensive framework linking AL to employee performance. The findings

reinforce that authentic leadership indirectly enhances follower work outcomes by fostering trust and high-quality exchanges, enriching existing knowledge on the relational and psychological processes that drive individual performance.

## Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations; longitudinal studies are recommended to validate these findings. Second, the study was confined to the healthcare sector in Pakistan, limiting generalizability across other industries and cultural contexts. Third, participant characteristics such as gender, age, and experience were not examined as potential confounding variables, which could be addressed in future research. Fourth, only trust and LMX were considered as mediators; future studies could include variables such as psychological empowerment, job engagement, or psychological safety. Finally, future research could explore potential moderators, including organizational ethics, policies, and virtuousness, to better understand boundary conditions in the AL–performance relationship.

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